

Vijjavimutti Buddhist Symposium celebrating
the 20th Anniversary of The Buddhist and Pali College of Singapore on 21 September 2013 at
The Buddha Tooth Relic Temple.
The aim is to promote Buddhist thinking and its relevance to society today.



Photographs taken by Brother Bill Loh Distinguished speakers, guests and the organising committee



THE SEARCH FOR MENTAL BALANCE AND HAPPINESS

(Part 2 of 2)

A paper presented by Sister Sylvia Bay at the symposium. She has 9 years of formal education in Buddhism and holds a BA (Hons) in Buddhist Studies from Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka, and a Masters Degree in International Public Policy (Johns Hopkins University). She has been teaching Dhamma at Mangala Vihara and giving regular Dhamma talks at various Buddhist organisations in Singapore.



The audience

Conditions for success

In the *Bodhirajakumara Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikaya*), the Buddha identified five conditions necessary for spiritual success and enlightenment. I think they are valid for our purpose here also. To be able to achieve mental balance and be happy, the surest way is to weave the Noble Eightfold Path into daily living. To be able to walk this path successfully, below are the necessary preconditions.

a) Faith “in the Buddha’s enlightenment” – I believe that the starting point of any treatment success must be faith in the skill of the doctor, and in the medicine he prescribes. We believe that the Buddha had indeed discovered a form of treatment that can enable the practitioner to realize and experience unconditioned relief from all forms of mental discomfort and distress. We also believe that the Dhamma is effective in guiding the sincere practitioner to that enlightenment and realization of unconditioned bliss. I personally find that everything that is needed for completing the spiritual journey can be found in the suttas.

b) Health – the Buddha said this means being “free from illness and affliction” and “having good digestion and is able to bear the strain of striving”. This is practical and sound advice. For the average man, when he is physically sick, his ability to concentrate and to see the mind objectively is compromised. It would be extremely difficult for a mind so distracted by worry and pain to be objective and penetrative. So the moral of the story is practise while we still enjoy good health! Later may just be too late.

c) Honest and sincere – the Buddha described this as “showing himself as is to the community”; the Buddha was talking to Sangha members when he cited the five

preconditions. My own sense of this condition is that it means the practitioner must be honest and sincere about his own spiritual development and understanding or lack thereof. I consider this to be an extremely important condition. It is very tempting for the individual to want to achieve great spiritual attainment. I mean, how nice it is to be an ariya (*a noble one*) and be a field of immeasurable merits!

But seriously, this is not an ego trip. Ultimately, this is about realizing unconditioned peace and bliss as a result of enlightenment. Pretending to be what one is not does not change the fact that there is no wisdom and no peace. The practitioner must thus be fully aware of his own strengths and weaknesses, and be honest about what he knows or not. If one were to lie to oneself, it would mean he can’t see what needs to be done and then how could he complete the spiritual journey?

d) “Energetic in abandoning unwholesome states and in undertaking wholesome ones”

To me this demonstrates not just a strong determination to practise but the mental discipline and skill to practise moment to moment, on a daily basis, as a matter of routine, as a way of life. I have found that when one is conscientious and makes careful and deliberate effort to “abandon unwholesome states and develop wholesome ones” on a moment to moment basis, the meditation practices for the day tend to be more fruitful. The mind settles into a calm and focused state faster. It is detached faster. It is sharper with observations.

e) Wise – the Buddha was specific about the nature of wisdom as a condition for spiritual success: it is “possessing wisdom regarding rise and disappearance that is noble and penetrative and leads to the complete destruction of dukkha (suffering).”

This is the insight that arises when one sees for oneself how the mind really works and as a result of that knowledge and vision, realizes unconditioned bliss.

Dhamma in daily life

In this final segment, I shall offer some thoughts about what it means to embrace Dhamma in daily living. If we are sincerely committed to the spiritual practice, and conscientiously pursue it, at some point, there will be inevitable change in the way we see the world and interact with it. Below are a few of the more obvious and common transformation. But there will be those that may be unique to individuals.

a) Accepting conditionality

What does this mean? Most of us have a compulsive desire to change our environment and/or the people we encounter to suit us, our preferences. We often demand that others change to accommodate us. Why can't you do this? Why do you behave like that? Why are you so rude? Why is the sun so hot? Why is the room so cold?

A sincere practitioner would accept external conditions as they are. He knows that happiness lies within himself and if the mind is balanced, he would not have problems with the world without. He would accept others as they are: creatures of conditions, like himself. He would see them as having similar types of instincts, no different from what he has: craving, anger, delusion, fear, generosity, kindness, capacity for good and bad. Like him, they are heir of their own actions: good or bad choices, they must live by the beds they had made. So if they are like him, who is he to make self-righteous judgment about them? Who is he to demand that others must change for him? He knows that it is all about the state of his mind: as long as his mind is balanced, he is happy. The external environment is as it is, he just accepts and lives with it.

b) "Default" mindfulness

There should be some degree of "default" mindfulness as opposed to perpetual mindlessness. When you spend a lot of effort and time training the mind to be focused, attentive and mindful moment to moment, eventually and inevitably, the mind would get used to being objectively aware, of the moment, of breathing, of the body, of blinking, of rising and falling away of mental states, and so on. This mindfulness is not forced. The mind can still be distracted by sense objects,

but it will also return to watchfulness relatively quickly, i.e., "a default state". Mindfulness is now both a tool of mental balance and a way of life.

c) Living brahmavihara

Over time, if he is on the right track, the sincere practitioner would begin to be less caught up with his own ego. He has humility not because he feels inferior to another but because the sense of I-ego is becoming unreal, dissipating. If you spend a lot of time looking at the mental parts, after a while, you will stop perceiving things from an essential "whole". When that happens, when he has constantly let go of the "I-ego", he would find that being in a state of *metta* (kindly-friendliness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (emphatic joy) and *upekkha* (equanimity) is second nature and effortless. If there is very little "I" in his worldview, there is plenty of room for others.

d) Effortless Morality

I have mentioned earlier why upholding ethics and exercising restraint on our instincts is so necessary to the meditation practice. For the sincere practitioner, as craving reduces and as the "I-ego" diminishes, his capacity to undertake action that hurts another or that hurts himself will also diminish. He doesn't have to keep telling himself he should not kill. He will not steal. He must not lie, etc. He just won't do it. He wouldn't cheat and steal because the craving to enrich himself or to advance his interest is lacking. Over time, being morally upright is just a way of life, not a restraint to be remembered and to be practised.

e) Happiness and mental balance

Finally, all paths lead to this: a successful practitioner on the right track will find that he has greater mental equilibrium and inner happiness. He is not too caught up with sense objects. He responds to them mindfully, being aware of the danger of being too attached and having the mental skill to distance himself when necessary. He is also mindful of his "I-ego" and does not allow this instinct to blind him and cause him to either over-react to or be shaken by the external environment. In this sense, he has a far better chance of being less affected by the eight vicissitudes of life: gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain.

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